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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN REGIONAL ELECTIONS PREVIEW: STAVROPOL KRAY

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Regional дума elections in Stavropol Kray on March 11 will likely be dominated by the United Russia party, with the Communists and the second Kremlin party "A Just Russia" fighting for second place. The Liberal Democratic party and the Union of Right Forces will struggle to pass the seven percent threshold. United Russia's superior organization and regional control are expected to be too much for the fractured Just Russia party and its unpopular leader. END SUMMARY.

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Stavropol Kray's Electoral System  
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12. (U) According to Kray Election Commission chief Viktor Limanov, there are 20 registered political parties in the Kray, but only seven of them (United Russia (YR), A Just Russia (SR), the Communists (KPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), Union of Right Forces (SPS), Agrarian Party, and Patriots of Russia) are fielding candidates in the regional Duma elections. The number of seats in the Kray Duma has been doubled to 50, 25 of which will continue to be single-mandate seats, and the other 25 will be selected from party lists. In order to win party list seats, a party must receive at least seven percent of the vote. Parties currently holding seats in the Duma are automatically registered, while other parties must either collect 10,000 signatures or pay a bond of 5% of the campaign spending limit (the limit for a party list campaign is 60 million rubles; for a single-mandate seat the limit is five million rubles). The bond is forfeited if the party or candidate does not receive at least seven percent of the vote. According to Limanov and NGO leaders, corruption is limited to illegal use of administrative resources and minor abuses of campaign laws, but does not extend to electoral fraud.

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The Parties: United Russia vs. Everybody Else  
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13. (SBU) United Russia organization: YR has a firm hold on the Kray government and will likely increase its share in the Duma on March 11. According to Federal Duma Deputy Anatoly Semchenko (a YR member from Stavropol), the party's goal is to gain more than 40% of the vote and to secure a majority of both the single mandate and party list seats. The YR campaign, based in an old fortress with a commanding view of the Stavropol plain, is being run by Sergey Ryzantsev, a former colonel and current candidate. "We are active in every electoral district and have candidates running for each single-mandate seat. Our campaign materials, which were just

approved by United Russia headquarters in Moscow, will feature (Duma Speaker Boris) Gryzlov's portrait and the portrait of the Governor." Ryzantsev said that his local party organization followed the administrative district structure, not the electoral district structure, because this was "more useful." According to members of voter-rights NGOs and opposing parties, this is because YR relies upon administrative resources for campaigning. YR's primary campaign issues will be increasing living standards and economic development, especially in the rural areas.

14. (SBU) Just Russia disorganization: In contrast to YR's stiff model of bureaucratic efficiency, SR is still solidifying the merger of its constituents, the Party of Life, Rodina, and Pensioners party. The Stavropol branch of SR was formed around the Party of Life structure. Sergey Shak, the head of the local SR branch told us, "It was not an easy process, but it's done now. We have agreed to put aside our personal differences and ambitions for the good of our party." Shak, in a meeting joined by the mayor, told us that the main campaign theme would be "spravedlivnost" ("social justice"), but he offered no specifics. Similarly, SR leaders offered little in the way of concrete plans for their campaign, saying that they were waiting for the results of the SR national congress to be held in February. Mayor Kuzmin noted that SR was stronger in the urban areas, and that the main concern was migration from the countryside straining municipal services and driving up the cost of living. He offered no remedies for this issue other than plans to request more assistance from the regional and federal governments. Shak said that SR was going to register for the elections by paying the bond rather than spend time collecting signatures.

15. (SBU) Other parties: The KPRF is probably the second strongest party in the Kray, but its support is shrinking as its elderly supporters die off and others move to YR and SR.

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The solid core that remains will likely fetch 10-15 percent of the vote. SPS local leader Boris Obolonets told us that he was doubtful that his party would exceed the seven percent threshold. "We thought the situation was hopeless until we saw what happened in Perm, so now we are a little bit optimistic." (Note: On December 3, SPS had a surprisingly strong showing in the Perm Duma elections, winning 16 percent of the vote. End note.) He said that SPS support was strong among businessmen, who privately backed SPS while publicly supporting YR. Obolonets said that SPS faced opponents using administrative resources in the cities (by SR) and countryside (by YR), but that they would campaign honestly and door-to-door. The Agrarian party, which had been very strong in the Kray and currently holds 11 seats in the regional Duma, has practically disappeared. United Russia claims that most of Agrarian supporters now support United Russia, and most of the prominent Agrarian politicians are now running under the United Russia banner. The remaining candidates and their supporters have mostly been divided between the KPRF and SR.

16. (SBU) Personal politics: The governor, Alexander Chernogorov, is a member of United Russia and is very popular in the region. His main rival is Stavropol city mayor Dmitriy Kuzmin, a member of A Just Russia, whose popularity is low and decreasing. According to members of the Governor's office, Mayor Kuzmin had attempted to join YR last year, but was refused because of his high negative rating. Kuzmin has a reputation as a heavy drinker, and his personal involvement in helping the mayor of Pyatigorsk flee the scene of an accident which killed five people last August has depressed his ratings in the countryside. While the governor is not free of scandal -- his wife published an open letter in the local press on January 19, calling him a cheapskate who played billiards all day and who refused to grant her a divorce -- his personal ratings are very high, especially in rural areas.

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NGOs and other organizations  
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17. (SBU) Vasiliy Krasulya, the head of the local GOLOS voter-rights organization, offered a glum assessment of the electoral landscape in Stavropol Kray. He said that the federal and regional government continued to stifle electoral competition through legislation and abuse of office. The seven percent threshold makes it nearly impossible for smaller parties enter the Duma, and the government, especially the YR-dominated Kray government, uses its influence and administrative resources to reinforce its position in power. Independent journalist Igor Voronin, who runs his own radio station and political talk show, was less concerned about fraud, and told us, "Sure, there is some rule-breaking and abuse of office, but the truth is that the majority of the people here support United Russia because they support Putin and because they know what to expect from them: Stability." He said that the local SR organization was "half criminal" and they were much more dangerous. "A Just Russia was created to keep United Russia from getting too fat, but they are not and cannot be a governing party." The Bishop of Stavropol and Vladikavkaz, Theophan, noted that the Orthodox Church had a good working relationship with the government (although he thought that the government should give the church more resources), and that the church was impartial. "We will work with the officials elected by the people. Our priests are not allowed to participate in any electoral activities or to campaign from the pulpit."

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Comment  
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18. (SBU) The elections in Stavropol Kray are expected to show strong support for United Russia and for centrist policies. Support for other parties will reflect other currents in the region (such as the KPRF's support among nostalgic "old believers") or in the case of SR, general dissatisfaction with the government. United Russia clearly has a huge head start in terms of organization, support, policies, and administrative resources that should result in a solid majority in the new Duma.

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